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RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 4910  
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 2673  
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 2538  
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 3154  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC  
RHMFISS/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC  
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RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 3373

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 000312

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SCA/CEN; DRL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/08/2019

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [KIRF](#) [PGOV](#) [TX](#)

SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: SEVENTH DAY ADVENTISTS WORKED TO  
IMPROVE RELATIONS WITH AUTHORITIES

Classified By: Charge Richard Miles, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: The Seventh Day Adventist Church has a long history in Turkmenistan. Despite some persistent problems, a church leader described current relations with the authorities as "good, but not the best" that they could be. The church leader noted his own efforts to educate the authorities about his church as a key reason for the improvement. He also appreciated U.S. support during the difficult years leading up to 2004, noting that it resulted in a change for the better. Still, the church is not able to own its own building, which limits the scope of its activities, and has difficulty inviting foreign speakers and obtaining religious literature. He thought a revised Law on Religious Organizations, if and when adopted, could be an opportunity for hard-liners to make things tougher for adherents of minority religions in Turkmenistan. Overall, the experience of the registered Seventh Day Adventist Church highlights the mixed record of the Turkmenistan Government to date, including areas in need of further improvement. END SUMMARY.

SEVENTH DAY ADVENTISTS: A LONG HISTORY IN TURKMENISTAN

12. (C) On March 6, Political Officer discussed the situation of the Seventh Day Adventist Church in Turkmenistan with church leader Pavel Fedotov. Despite the Seventh Day Adventist Church having been present in Turkmenistan since 1907, the Seventh Day Adventists have followed a tortuous path to reach what Fedotov described as "good, but not the best" relations with Government authorities. The most difficult period was during 1996-2004, with the nadir in 1999 when the church's registration was revoked and its building was bulldozed.

CHURCH LEADER STROVE TO IMPROVE RELATIONS WITH AUTHORITIES

13. (C) Fedotov recounted about his own detention in 2000, as well as the confiscations and fines imposed on the Seventh Day Adventists during those days. He said he worked hard to reduce such pressure on his church's members. He noted that the situation changed for the better in 2004, a change that he attributed to U.S. action in intervening with the Turkmen Government. In 2004, the Seventh Day Adventists received registration "in half a day, after having been de-registered

for five years."

14. (C) Fedotov said the church has invested in relations with local authorities in order to educate them, emphasizing that he has not sacrificed his church's principles in the process.

For example, the Seventh Day Adventists send congratulatory messages to the Government on major holidays. When a member of the Presidential Commission for Religious Affairs (CRA) asked for copies of religion laws in other former Soviet republics, Fedotov located the laws and provided copies. Fedotov noted that depending on the different ways in which pastors choose to interact with local authorities, there are varying results. For churches that are not registered, the demands sometimes voiced by those pastors to the authorities only worsen their situation. Rather than applying for a permit for a meeting and challenging its denial, they hold a meeting without trying to obtain a permit and then complain when the "illegal" meeting is broken up. Some pastors of religious minority groups want to avoid contact with the authorities, viewing such contact as "contamination." In cases where these pastors do not welcome authorities to attend their services, it makes the authorities suspicious about the group's activities.

15. (C) According to Fedotov, some pastors preach that the Koran is not good, which of course the authorities do not like. He said Seventh Day Adventists preach tolerance and do not criticize others. They also try to be socially active, providing free meals, organizing an exhibit on healthy lifestyles, and helping people quit drugs and smoking.

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Fedotov indicated that other religious groups that do not carry out such activities have a harder time. In general, he thought that both religious leaders and Government officials want people to be able to have normal religious lives, but have different views and often misunderstandings result.

DESPITE REGISTRATION, MANY RESTRICTIONS REMAIN

16. (C) The Seventh Day Adventists currently have 80 members in Ashgabat and 15 members in Turkmenabat. The church rents space to hold a service once per week. They would like to acquire a building, either purchased or on long-term lease, but have not been able to obtain permission from the Government. The Government tells them that "now is not the appropriate time." Fedotov said the authorities work slowly and that their mentality does not change quickly. Even if higher level officials are already more open to change, it is hard to change the mentality of local officials. Fedotov mentioned that the congregation in Turkmenabat had some problems that the national level CRA helped resolve. Now, the Seventh Day Adventists have developed better relations with the local officials there, especially with the Mufti for Lebap Province, who is also the chairman of the provincial CRA.

17. (C) Despite generally positive conditions for the Seventh Day Adventists, there remain problems. Fedotov mentioned that it is difficult to invite foreign speakers to visit their church. Officially, they are not allowed to receive bibles and other religious literature. Although they obtain such literature anyway, Fedotov said it is risky. It is difficult to rent premises for their services. They can only rent from private landlords - government-owned buildings are not available to them. They have not been able to obtain permission to hold a summer youth camp. Also, they cannot get permission to meet more often or more openly. The cost of renting premises, in the absence of ownership of their own building, also puts practical financial limits on how often the members can meet. Still, he said other groups have it worse, with confiscation of their literature and interrogations by police.

A REVISED RELIGION LAW COULD BE TOUGHER

18. (C) Fedotov did not think the situation for religious freedom would improve further. He said he was waiting for the Law on Religious Organizations to be revised. He had heard that in other Central Asian countries, the situation became worse after new religion laws were adopted. Based on his discussions with Turkmen officials, Fedotov thought they wanted to make the law tougher. He cited comments reportedly made by the deputy chairman of the CRA who said that women and invalids cannot be church leaders. While Fedotov acknowledged that this was the official's personal view, he argued that, given his position, such a view created a problem.

19. (C) COMMENT. The experience of the Seventh Day Adventists illustrates that, even with registration, the obstacles for minority religious groups abound. While they are allowed to hold public services, their inability to acquire their own church means that for practical, financial reasons, their ability to meet as often as they would like is severely limited. Likewise, while they are able to obtain religious literature, it cannot be done openly, exposing them to risk. And despite their presence for over a century, dating back to Czarist times, they still have to educate officials so as not to be considered a suspect group. All of which suggests that even with the meaningful improvement in conditions that the Seventh Day Adventists have experienced, a great deal of work lies ahead. END COMMENT.

MILES